



We left Tashkent a little better rested and made our way South and East, eventually driving through the Fergana Valley to the border with Kyrgyzstan at Osh. The Fergana Valley is a stunning slice of rural idyll, with lush farmland and mountains occasionally glimpsed in the distance. All this apparent tranquility has not always been the reality, however our journey was relatively incident free. Only the smog posed any kind of irritation, this was unlike anything we had experienced: a thick blanket of foul smelling fog that can only be explained by the Central Asian fondness for Shashlik roasted on an open wood fire.

The Fergana Valley is also home to one of our journey's more bizarre international borders, cutting across the valley and isolating Kyrgyz Osh from the rest of the Uzbek population. Fortunately, cross border trade is apparently still flourishing in spite of restrictions, some report that homes built on the border provide useful front-back door trade routes during the occasional border closures. Unfortunately our drive took longer than we thought and we ended up approaching the border in darkness, something that we usually avoided. The tension was further increased when we came up to what looked like just another police check point until we saw the men in fatigues, balaclavas and AK-47s. Definitely not what we had grown used to, even in central Asia: we hesitated for only a second before resorting to our usual regal tactic of confident smiles and waves as we continued to drive past the static vehicles and threatening firepower on either side. Several yards past with still no reaction from the goons we thanked our lucky Landrovers and continued on our way to the border.

Expecting another Central Asian border story, we were surprised by the apparently relaxed atmosphere on both sides of the gates. We accompanied a truck as the only other border business that evening: money appeared to change hands at customs, however we seemed to be exempt from that particular payment. Once on the Kyrgyz side we were delayed momentarily by a security official who had locked his keys in his office and a computer system that refused to boot up. It also took a certain amount of searching to find a customs official that would sign the necessary import documentation for the car. Once found he could not locate his forms but seemed satisfied with the spare that we had picked up in Georgia, still with its import/export stamps from that country.

Far from being pleased by this relaxed attitude to border control we were left a little

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disconcerted and apprehensive of how any potential omissions might play at any of the inevitable police road blocks, or when we tried to bargain our way across at the exit. We need not have worried: our highly tuned travelers' paranoia was unnecessary in Kyrgyzstan, an island of rationalism in an ocean of authoritarianism.

We stayed the night in Osh, Ruth achieving a 50% discount on the price of the room, which is a considerable achievement given our tattered nerves and the negotiating skills of Central Asian businessmen. Apart from this it was not our best stay: I got ill with what later turned out to be Giardia, while Ruth discovered that our four bank cards had been whittled down to one. We were used to banks' inflexibility from previous travelling so had hard cash to spare, however it was still irritating to be left high and dry by banks we had searched out and kept informed prior to the trip.

We spent the following two days leaving the tarmac road behind and heading across passes and through extraordinary folded landscapes to the town of Naryn, a day or so's drive from where we would be crossing into China at the Torrugart pass. After our experience of Central Asia it did not take much distance to feel as if things had changed. As soon as we were out of the Fergana valley people's dress, their looks, the landscape and the culture all made a transition. We soon passed our first Kyrgyz shepherds, their yurts a short distance on. The local dress took some getting used to, in particular the hats worn by the men: tall and brimless, they are made of felt and finely decorated, quite out of keeping with their otherwise sober clothing.



We spent the night of the drive almost at the peak of the precipitous track that crosses a 3200m pass. This was part of our aim to gather as much time at altitude as possible before we crossed into China and headed up onto the XinJian/Tibet highway, the highest road in the world with a

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considerable time spent hovering around the 5000m mark. Apart from seeking out some thin air we also went hunting for Diamox, a drug that accelerates the growth of red blood cells. We thought that this might be a challenge for a small town such as Naryn, however we were happy to find that pharmacies were the dominant business in the region, certainly outnumbering decent grocery stores. After our 7th pharmacy we had emptied the town of Diamox as well as buying various other antibiotics to deal with our withering health after a month of our Central Asian diet of mutton kebabs, dust and plov.



After a couple of nights in a homestay in Naryn we headed up to Lake Song Col, an immense body of water at 3000m altitude, completely surrounded by low mountains. Below the mountains the lake sits in a wide, flat valley with little vegetation other than grass to break the views. It is an empty and hauntingly beautiful landscape. We arrived late in the year and many of the shepherds had moved on, descending out of the isolated Song Col valley to warmer pastures for the winter. We still saw a few isolated yurts, perhaps 4 or 5, either on the flat land surrounding the lake or close to good grass and streams behind. Apart from these few signs of people we were completely alone, so when we woke up after our first night's camping to 4" of fresh snow we started to worry that we had misjudged the seasons and might get embarrassingly stranded on the wrong side of the steep pass to the lake. Fortunately the day time sun is still strong enough in early October to melt any overnight snow and free up the road back down.



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